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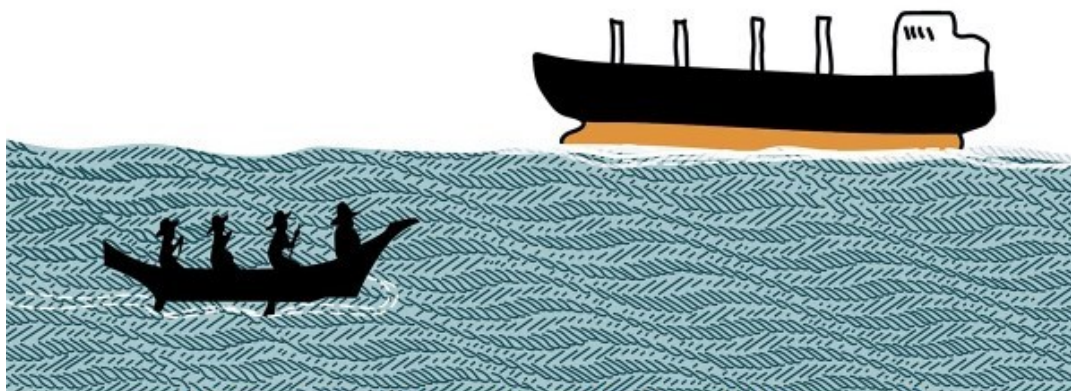
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Ballenger, Suzi and Hamlin, Charlotte, "Yours, Mine & Ours: Beyond Appropriation" (2018). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1128.

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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



**Textile Society of America 16th Biennial Symposium
Vancouver, Canada — September 19-23, 2018**

Published in *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings 2018*

Presented at Vancouver, BC, Canada; September 19 – 23, 2018

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Nobody owns a culture, but everyone inhabits one (or several), and in inhabiting a culture, one finds the tools for reaching out to other cultures.¹

Yours, Mine & Ours: Beyond Appropriation

Suzi Ballenger and Charlotte Hamlin

Abstract

As textile makers and researchers, we value the indigenous cultural wealth represented in the extraordinary array of textiles available to us through current worldwide channels. For millennia, textiles have been an effective vehicle for cultural intersection and exchange; traditions, materials, motifs, techniques, words, and beliefs are adopted, extended, and enriched by the meeting of peoples. Increasingly-and particularly with the advent of “fast fashion”-textile styles and motifs are being widely appreciated, and subsequently appropriated, without acknowledgement or compensation to the culture from which they derived.

Is it possible to create productive collaboration across cultures without exhausting or dispossessing the custodians of tradition? By examining a culture’s history and context, we can support our delicate responsibility to protect and share entwined identities. But do we? When does our ethical obligation to others waver? Where does appreciation and inspiration become appropriation, and sharing become stealing? What types of standards can we invent and enforce to defend both a personal or societal quest for identity and the guardians of cultural legacies? Is it possible?

Scrutinizing current standards in using the material and processes of cultures other than our own and we discuss our research in answering the questions we have put forth. Beginning with identification of what is considered cultural knowledge (yours), and continuing the dialogue to what can be original (mine), we will offer ways to merge with respect, into “ours”.

Yours

Aren't we taught that imitation is the highest form of flattery? Alliteration aside, the focus of this panel, Appropriation and Appreciation, has become a hot topic in recent years and may well be somewhat a red herring.

Since the beginning of "culture" - a word with a deliciously vague scope - the elements that humans have "planted and tended" in their experiential midst are reflections of their own observations, relationships, and beliefs about their world. These elements - visual symbols, tools, words, gods, and laws - have been "borrowed" by other humans who come in contact with the elements but perhaps not always with the cultivating humans themselves. Humans can't help but be influenced by these encounters - our neurobiology dictates that we absorb, reflect, recall, re-imagine, re-use these elements, fitting them to our own experiential midst. It's messy.

¹ Kenan Malik, “Kenan Malik on Cultural Appropriation,” *Art Review*, December 2017. https://artreview.com/features/ar_december_2017_feature_cultural_appropriation_kenan_malik/. Accessed January 20, 2018).

Whether elaborate silks from thousands of miles away or compelling motifs/symbols, these details contribute to the fabrication of our identity - individually and socially, adding, to paraphrase hooks, the "spice of ethnicity, the seasoning that can liven up a dull dish....".² Cultural crossroads are the richness of melting pots everywhere and always demonstrate some aspect of imbalance - value, trade, knowledge, etc. Inherent in this process is imitation, appreciation, adaption, and exploitation.

As humans, our attraction to these new elements is often compelling; we seek the "NEW". We link our access to it with our status - "being in the know", demonstrating our being "au courant", our buying power, our understanding of far-away lands. When this access becomes restricted in some way - too far, too expensive, too much time - those who still have access acquire more status and are elevated. The potential to put pressure on aspects of that equation - on the middleman, the artist, the antiques seller, the maker, the state, the wagon train - results in forms of policing the access, controlling consumption, and historically, that burden (generally economic) is borne by the lowest levels of the exchange.

By 16th century, Western (white) exploration and subsequent domination sharpened the imbalance, replacing cultural exchange with exploitation, albeit with engaging, intriguing, beautiful, even mind-expanding results at the consumption end. Curious then that as Western domination is rattled in the 20th and 21st century, we begin to describe that exploitation as "appropriation", a term which "...conflates several issues, from outright racism, to the unthinking but not necessarily racist use of 'exotic' cultural forms, to the deliberate challenge of cultural and religious beliefs and rules."³ The overreach here muddies the arguments, generates emotional responses that focus more on another type of authority and control - the policing of culture, the Yours versus Mine battleground which operates in a white tower setting and often never gets back to the essential dissection of economic exploitation and the goal of equal participation by the local and global cultures.

*Acts of appropriation are part of the process by which we make ourselves. Appropriating – taking something for one's own use – need not be synonymous with exploitation. This is especially true of cultural appropriation. The "use" one makes of what is appropriated is the crucial factor.*⁴

Mine

The line is crossed from appreciation to appropriation when the inspiration is in the interpretation and celebration - when we, as a maker/artist/designer assume the design is "ours". The idea of originality is increasingly debatable.

² bell hooks, "Eating the other: Desire and Resistance." In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 21.

³ Malik, "Cultural Appropriation."

⁴ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. (New York: The New Press, 1995), 11.

If I say my work is drawn from Japanese culture, would I be lying, appropriating, or appreciating? My work is inspired by Japanese design and techniques. Even more specifically, I am influenced by the ingenuity, work ethic, and attention to the sublime. And while all these values are certainly part of Japanese culture, they are also part of other cultures.

Do I have a right to promote my work as being influenced in this way? I have assimilated Japanese terminology for textile handwork into my own vocabulary – *yore*, *mizugoromo*, *shibori*, *boro-boro*, *wabi-sabi* – because these words describe a concept/technique more succinctly than an American word. And because of the information available today, I am able to connect with these values and learn more about why these techniques inspire me and hold my soul at attention through recognition of where I learned them from and who was instrumental in sharing knowledge with me. But is it wholly MINE?

Are we re-writing history when we copy, imitate or “swipe” the style of another culture? Think about that, for a moment, especially in light of our current political climate. Fake News! Truth isn’t Truth! Who says so? Just because a dumb idea is followed by two hundred million people, it’s still a dumb idea. Who establishes cultural equality? Who establishes a cultural identity? But who benefits from these controls and definitions? ⁵

Textile designers have an industry "standard" of 10% change from the original context/source to current design. Is that enough? Is it upheld? Artistic inspiration and sources of NEW, meet increasing social and economic pressure to be at forefront of trends - true since earliest trade routes. Now, with ever expanding population growth, impulse buying becomes the norm, cheaper goods undermine cheap goods, and the cycle spins faster.

Let’s look to history. Otti Berger patented her textiles in 1927 and was awarded her patent in 1932. ⁶ Was she copied? Was she protected? Did she need to be? Intellectual property should be held to the same judicial scrutiny as traditional/cultural knowledge. North American business culture is opportunity. It comes from the freedom to invent which has the protection of a patent. The patent protection helps prevent appropriation. The current term of copyright is the life of the author plus 70 years. If it is the work of corporate authorship, it is 95 years from publication or 120 years from creation, whichever expires first.

Someone copies my original design. I have the financial burden to legally prove my reasoning of prior art and my right as the originator. That same burden of proof is on traditional cultural property if the indigenous society claims infringement. Again, we have a situation of colonial context where the oppressors demand proof from the oppressed to support the claim to their own intellectual property that is being plagiarized.

⁵ Minh-Ha T. Pham, “Fashion’s Cultural-Appropriation Debate: Pointless”, *The Atlantic* May 2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/05/cultural-appropriation-in-fashionstop-talking-about-it/370826/> (Accessed May 28, 2018).

⁶ T’ai Smith, “Anonymous Textiles, Patented Domains: The Invention (and Death) of an Author.” *Art Journal* 67:2 (2008), 55.

Where IS the boundary? How can we move forward? I believe more than 10% is necessary. Any uses of cultural/traditional knowledge INCLUDING icons, motifs, and “inferred” styles should be considered part the traditional and cultural knowledge percentage.

Ours

By connecting to our past, we are able to define our current social community, and then project our values in anticipating the future. As an artist and business owner, I am capable of assisting other cultural communities navigate our system through advocating, education, but is my help welcome by others? Is that my responsibility? Is it my cultural obligation?

Global counterfeiting is big business but with serious implications for fragile local economies. Treating Traditional Knowledge (TK) as intangible intellectual property provides a potential tool for TK holders, both to protect private knowledge and to create a framework for compensation when knowledge is shared. However, treating TK as intellectual property risks inappropriately simplifying and commercializing knowledge systems that have long functioned using their own nuanced sharing protocols. Tying up TK in exclusive rights may also hinder the social gains that could be had as a result of greater knowledge sharing.⁷

Collaboration fosters sensitivity and understanding between artist, designer, and eventually consumer. Cultural sensitivity, education, and ethical business practices will teach values and encourage conscious choice for industry. “Culture should not be a walled garden, but nor is it a common field, where all can interact freely”.⁸

In United States, along with most other countries, we know that it is morally “wrong” to steal. There are common idioms “it’s not stealing, unless you get caught” or “it’s better to ask forgiveness than permission”. We have laws to protect the designer if they have the financial power to defend themselves. But indigenous cultures are not as powerful. Defining the knowledge and the cultural identity are initial big steps towards defending intellectual property. The US should help support other countries define copyright laws that will protect the indigenous communities and cultural minorities from infringement of their traditional designs by multinational companies.

Schemes and micro-finance projects that create links to markets where developing countries can trade their products as high value items is often promoted as Fair Trade. Notice I used the words “developing country” not “traditional knowledge”. It is easy to confuse the two. Traditional knowledge is inscribed deeply into a society so as to form the culture. Marketing this knowledge is the issue, especially when the opportunity to sell the work is undercut by powerful businesses. But who is responsible for protecting cultural knowledge? Who is responsible for the economic development of this knowledge into products?

⁷ Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage Project, 2015. Think Before You Appropriate. *Things to know and questions to ask in order to avoid misappropriating Indigenous cultural heritage*. Simon Fraser University: Vancouver.

⁸ Faisal Al Yafai. “Who decides which cultures is appropriate?” *The National*. June 19, 2017. <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/who-decides-which-culture-is-appropriate-1.25059>. (Accessed May 25, 2018).

How can we help? Should we?

*Such policing is deeply problematic, both artistically and politically. It deadens creativity and it assaults imagination. The importance of imagination is that we can take ourselves beyond where we are, beyond our own narrow perspectives, to imagine other peoples, other worlds, other experiences. Without the ability to do that, both artistic creativity and progressive politics shrivel.*⁹

How can we identify without politicizing? How can we promote values with a sense of integrity without isolating? An international standard requires global education with a sensitive understanding of history in context. Our responsibility as educators is to support “syncretism” – those systems where beliefs are pulled together.

There is no single solution. We can lay a ground-work and suggest a variety of systems such as:

- Teaching economy
- Identifying markets and products
- Incentives for products with quality
- Incentives for products that highlight cultural value.
- Create meaningful brands such as Bihor, Mayamiko, Brother Vellies, Mayan Hands, Handmade Matters, Kilomet109, etc.
- Teach business positioning; low wages do not equal competitiveness
- Educate the consumer

Talking about appropriation is the epitome of intellectual study because it intersects with the moral code of individuals and society. As we evolve as a culture, the moral code will also evolve, so who should set the tone? We need to continue to contribute to the conversation. When the discussion is ended, there is no cultural evolution. When we do not listen or strive to further engage in sharing, or bartering, or using, there is no more inspiration.

⁹ Malik, “Cultural Appropriation.”

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